DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 404 819 EC 305 337

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TITLE The New Zealand Special School Project: An Evaluation of a Special School System.
PUB DATE Jul 96
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual World Congress of the International Association for the Scientific Study of Intellectual Disabilities (10th, Helsinki, Finland, July 8-13, 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; *Inclusive Schools; Mainstreaming; *Moderate Mental Retardation; Multiple Disabilities; *Parent Attitudes; Parent School Relationship; Program Evaluation; Satisfaction; *Severe Mental Retardation; Special Education; *Special Schools; Student Characteristics; *Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *New Zealand

ABSTRACT

A survey examined the perceptions of parents and staff concerning the services provided to students (N=1,492) at 29 special education schools in New Zealand. Respondents were also asked to comment upon the possibility of including these students within regular school settings. Information was also collected regarding the demographic, ethnic, and socio-economic characteristics of the students; the medical definition and presumed etiology of their conditions; and their prior educational history. Seventy percent of the student sample attended schools for students with intellectual disabilities (implying mental retardation in the moderate to severe range.) The great majority of students also experienced additional disabilities. Responses were received from 1,073 parents and 469 teachers. Parental satisfaction with the type of curriculum offered by the schools was high and there was congruence between what parents and teaching staff viewed as appropriate curriculum. Parental satisfaction with teaching quality was also high. Parental attitudes toward the inclusion of their child in regular schools were generally negative, with many parents citing previously unsuccessful attempts at inclusion as the reason. Many teachers in special schools were positively inclined towards the concept of inclusion-integration, but only if appropriate support services were provided. (DB)

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THE NEW ZEALAND SPECIAL SCHOOL PROJECT : AN EVALUATION OF A SPECIAL SCHOOL SYSTEM

ED 404 819

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Abstract

The New Zealand Special Schools project was an independent evaluation of the effectiveness of New Zealand Special Schools, as measured by the level of parental satisfaction with the curriculum provided and quality of teaching offered. School staff were also requested to evaluate their school's performance in terms of a number of variables. Both parents and staff were asked to comment upon the viability of including these students within regular school settings.

Information was also collected regarding the demographic, ethnic and socio-economic characteristics of the students, the medical definition and presumed etiology of their conditions, and their prior educational history. Twenty nine(56%) of New Zealand's special schools participated in the survey providing data on 1492 students. Seventy percent of the sample attended schools for students with intellectual disabilities. Responses were received from 1073 parents and guardians of students attending these schools and from 469 teachers and teacher assistants employed in the schools. Although no intelligence test information is available for this population, alternative measures indicate that the students attending the schools for students with intellectual disabilities would be classified as moderately to severely intellectually disabled in other settings and in almost all cases these students experienced multiple disabilities. They are arguably the most disabled children in New Zealand.

Parental satisfaction with the type of curriculum offered by the schools was high and there was congruence between what parents and teaching staff viewed as appropriate curriculum for these students. Parental satisfaction with the quality of teaching in the special schools was also generally high. The attitudes of parents of these children towards the inclusion of their child into regular schools were generally negative, with many parents citing previously unsuccessful attempts to include their child as the major reason for their negative attitude. Many teachers in special schools were positively inclined towards the concept of inclusion-.integration provided certain conditions could be guaranteed. They were, however, doubtful that these conditions could be met in the foreseeable future.

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The comments of both parents and teachers provide major insights into what is required if students as disabled as these are to be successfully included into regular schools. There appears to be a genuine demand in New Zealand for special schools which currently provide effectively for many students with this level of disability. Because of time constraints of a symposium the paper focusses upon the description of the students attending New Zealand Special Schools and the reasons their parents enrolled them in this type of facility

The purpose of this study was to describe the population of students attending special schools in New Zealand thereby providing a data base for future planning. The description of the special school population posed certain problems becausc of New Zealand's rejection of the concept of categorization of disability and its policy of allocating resources on the basis of needs. These problems were further compounded by the rejection of intelligence tests as means of defining intellectual disability (Mitchell and O'Brien, 1994). Such policies, which were influenced by the United Kingdom's Warnock Report (1978), were also implemented in the United Kingdom and in the Australian State of Victoria (Collins, 1984), where following Auditor- General (1992) recommendations, the concept of non- categorization was later abandoned (Pickering, 1993). The survey also sought to evaluate the performance of the special schools in terms of the levels of parent and teacher satisfaction with the programs provide by the schools

Method

The opportunity to participate in the survey was extended to all special schools in New Zealand through the agency of the New Zealand Special Schools Principals' Association. Those Boards of Trustees of schools which elected to participate in the survey were provided with questionnaires which addressed the medical, demographic and school history of each child and the current and estimated service requirements of each student. A Student Resource Index, a device designed to evaluate the degree and multiple nature of each student's disability was also completed for each student. Questionnaires designed to evaluate the performance of the schools were completed by each participating parent and teacher. Instruction in the use of these devices was provided through the Special Schools network. In the interests of confidentiality respondants had the option to return completed questionnaires to either the school, the central data processing point, or to the authors at the University of Auckland.

Subjects

Twenty nine schools (56 percent of New Zealand's Special Schools) elected to participate in the survey involving 1498 students (59 percent of the special school population), 1073 parents and 469 members of the teaching staff of these schools. The sample encompass both hospital schools, the four schools for students with physical disabilities, the largest facility for students with social difficulties, the sole school for students with visual impairment and 21

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of the nation's 30 schools for students with moderate/severe intellectual disability.

Procedure

Information regarding the student's demographic and social status, and the aspects of the students impairments were provided by the school from existing records. Estimates of existing and projected needs for ancillary services were provided by staff of the schools. Qualitative responses to the parent and teacher questionnaires were categorized by a research assistant under the direction of the authors.

Results

Which children attend special schools ?

In New Zealand students are usually enrolled in special schools on the basis of their major presenting disability. When asked to describe the major presenting disability of the children in their care teachers nominated intellectual disability in 1051 cases, or 70 percent of the sample.. Physical Disability was nominated as the major presenting disability in 162 cases (11 percent of the sample). Physical health was nominated as the major presenting disability in 128 cases (14.5 percent of the sample), mainly by the hospital schools. Behavioural difficulties was perceived as the major presenting disability in 78 cases (5.3 percent of the sample) as was visual impairment in a further five percent of cases.

When asked to provide a technical description of the student's impairment the major categories of disability described by the schools were moderate to severe intellectual disabilty (417, Down Syndrome (122), autistism (119), micro or hydrocephalus (53) and cerebral palsy (229)

Multiple Disabilities

Teachers were requested to describe any disabling conditions which the children experienced additional to the major presenting disability. For example, a child might be described as intellectually disabled but may also experience, mobility, communication, behavioural and vision problem

354 students (24 percent of the sample) were nominated by their teachers as experiencing difficulty under six or more categories of disability, 1223 children (82 percent of students) were described as experiencing three or more categories of disability Approximately four percent of students were nominated under all eight categories of disability.

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Given what is known of the educational and adaptive behavioural consequences of these syndromes and the multiple nature of their disabilitities these students are, as a group, arguably the most disabled children in New Zealand.

Parent Evaluation of the special schools' performance.

1073 parents of the 1492 students in the survey completed a questionnaire designed to evaluate the performance of the special schools in which their children were enrolled. A response rate of 72 percent was achieved. What follows is an analysis of parental responses to six of the survey questions.

In response to the question: "*Is the school meeting your child's needs ?*" 992 of the responding parents or guardians (86 percent) replied that these needs were being met. A subgroup of 66 parents or guardians (6.2 percent) felt that their child's needs were not being met while 84 parents (7.8 percent) did not complete this question

Parents were given the opportunity to comment on major issues through a series of open ended questions. Their responses were grouped into the following categories recorded in Figure 1.1 and subsequent figures.

The major reasons expressed by parents for enrolling their child in a special school were the needs they perceived for an *appropriate curriculum* (292 responses). Also cited was the need to gain access to *specialist teachers* (162 responses) and access to a *caring environment* (78 respondents). A further 84 parents (8.9 percent) of the 941 coded responses felt that they had no alternative but to enroll in the special schools. Substantial numbers of parents acted on professional advice while others acted in response to the lack of resources in regular schools.

In response to the question:

Why did you enroll your child in this special school ?

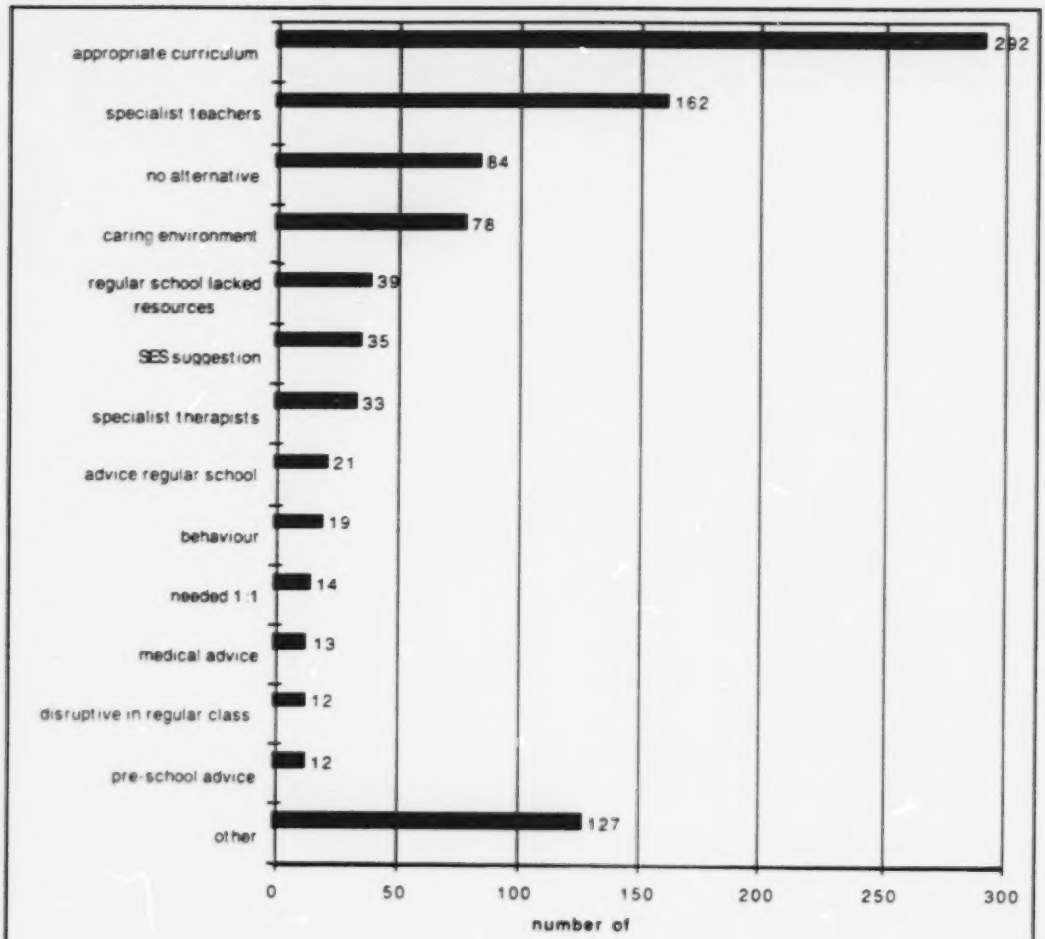

Figure 1.1 Parental responses to the question: Why did you enroll your child in this school?

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In response to the question *'Have you considered integrating your child into a regular school ?'*, a variety of replies were received.

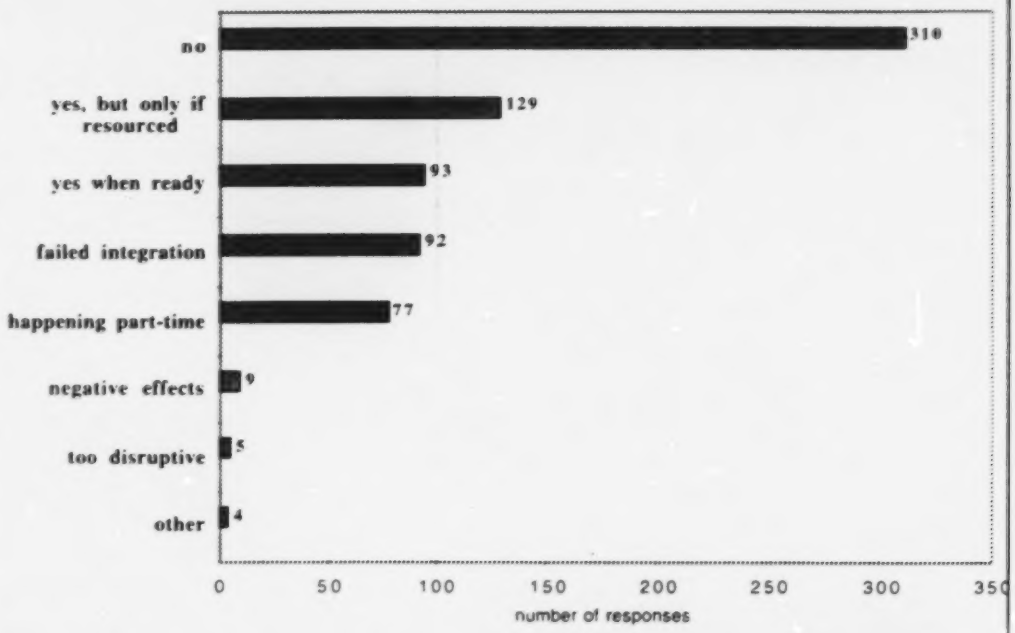

Figure 1.2 Parental responses to the question. Have you considered integrating your child into a regular school ?

From Figure 1.2 it is clear that the most common response to this question is 'no'. The question is somewhat ambiguous as it is not clear whether the parents meant that they had not thought (considered) about integrating their child or whether they had considered the issue and rejected the option. On the basis of responses to later questions it appears that many are saying that they have considered the option and rejected it.

A substantial number of parents would countenance integration when they felt that the child was ready (13 percent) of the 710 responses or if the integration or inclusion exercise was appropriately resourced (17 percent). Some 13 percent of parents had attempted the integration of their child and rated the exercise as a failure. A further 11 percent parents felt that integration was already happening albeit on a part-time basis.

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The responses to the question *"What are the benefits of integration ?"* are summarized in Figure 1.4

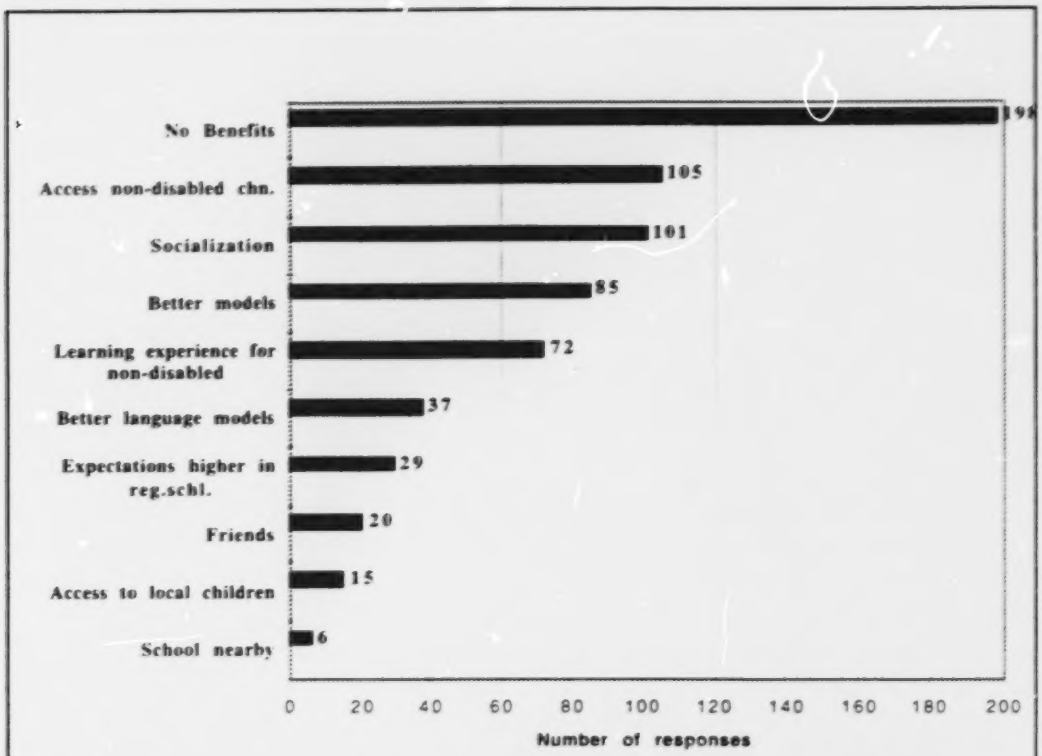

Figure 1.3 Parental responses to the question What are the benefits of integration ?

From Figure 1.3 the following points are evident :

* Approximately 33 percent of parents saw no benefits in integration.

* Other parents saw benefits in having access to non-disabled children (16 percent of responses); in opportunities for socialization (16 percent), in the access to better role models (13 percent) and better language models (5.6 percent).

* 4.4 percent of parents cited the higher expectations of regular schools as a benefit, 2.2 percent of parents saw benefits in the access to local children.

* A disturbingly low number of parents (20 responses or 3.3 percent) saw integration as an opportunity for their child to make friends.

* Some 12 percent of parents cited the benefits to non-disabled students through their association with disabled children.

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In response to the question *'What concerns do you have about integration ?'*

The following responses were received (Figure 1.4)

* Parents were most concerned about bullying and teasing of their child (12 percent).

* A substantial number of parents (12 percent) were concerned that their child would not be able to cope with the regular school curriculum (academic unsuitability,).

* They were concerned with the lack of suitably qualified teachers (11 percent).

* The safety and supervision of their children was a major concern for 10 percent of parents.

* Some were concerned that their child would be overlooked (6.6 percent); receive insufficient teacher aide time (7.7 responses) and teacher time (7 percent).

* They were concerned that teachers in regular schools would not be able to control their child (3.5 percent) and that their child's behaviour would disrupt the education of other children(4.4 percent).

* Arrangements for toileting their child (3.6 percent) was also a concern for some parents.

* A number of parents were concerned for the emotional well being of their children with 9 percent of parents citing the negative effects and frustration of the integration experience as a major concern, while 2 percent of parents were concerned that their child's self esteem could be diminished by the experience (22 percent).

* General ignorance of disabled children was a concern for 4.6 percent of parents as in some cases was the intolerance of other parents (2.3 percent)

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Parental responses to the question *'What concerns do you have about integration ?'* are summarized in the following Figure 1.4

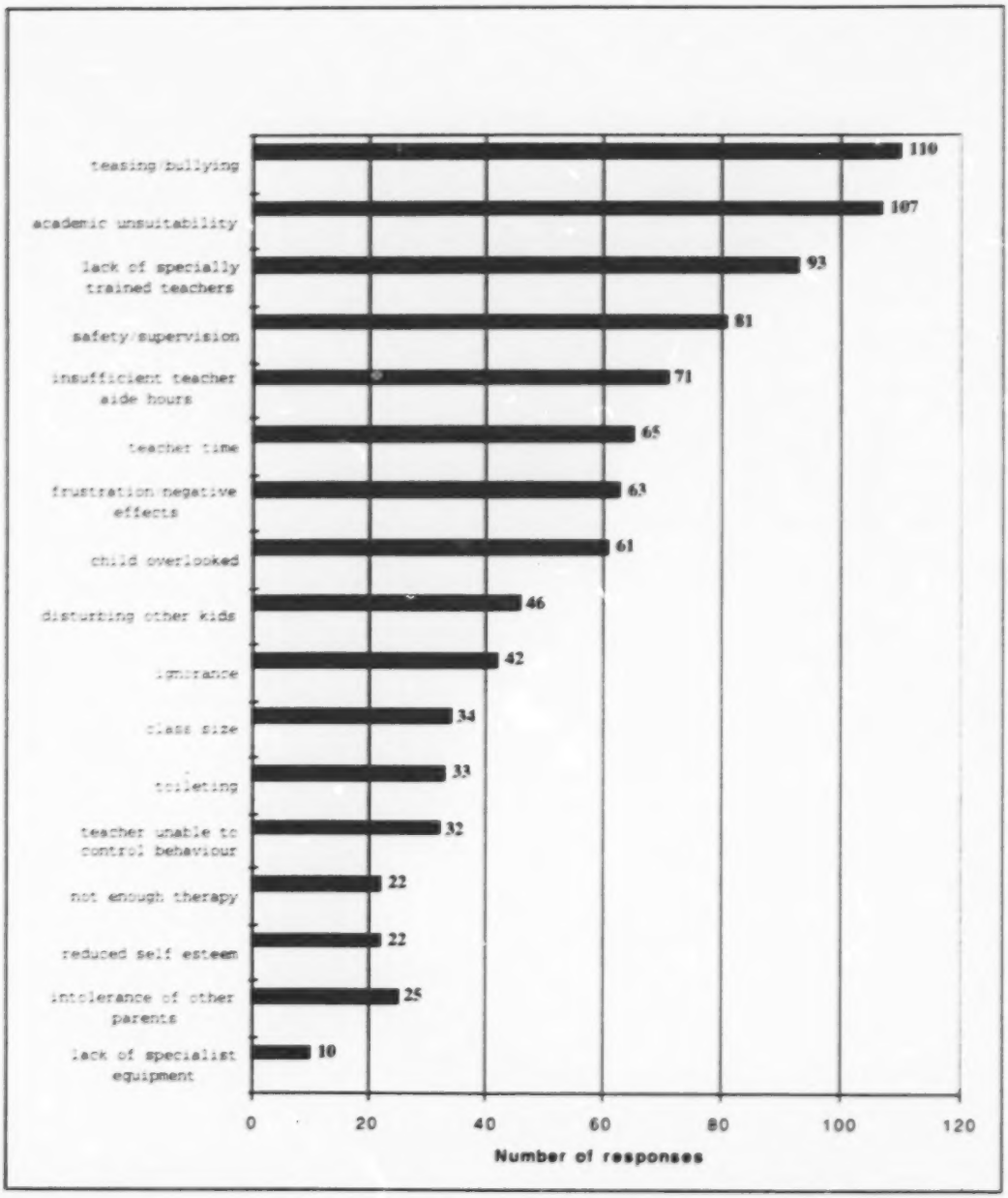

Figure 1.4 Parental responses to the question What concerns do you have about integration ?

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In response to the question " *Under what conditions would you integrate your child ?*" a variety of responses were received (Figure 1.4).

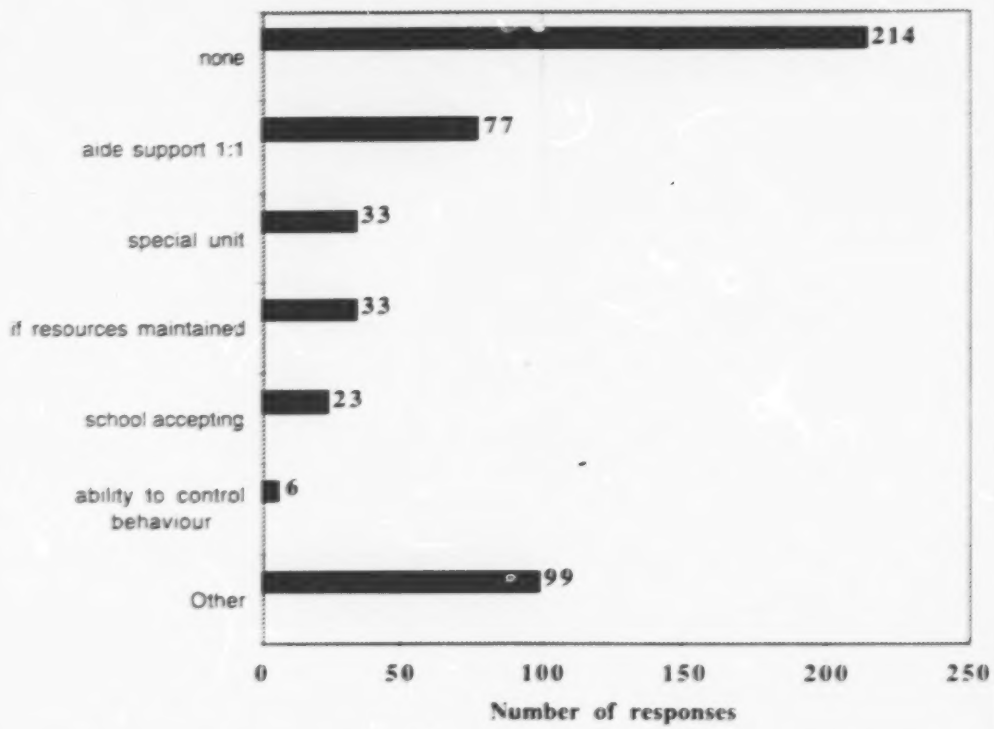

Figure 1.6 Parental responses to the question Under what conditions would you integrate your child ?

* A significant number of parents (44 percent) replied that under no conditions would they integrate their child

* Some 16 percent parents would integrate their child if 1:1 aide support was made available.

* A further 6.8 percent of parents would consider integration if an appropriate special unit was available or if resources were maintained (6.8 percent)

* 23 parents would integrate if an accepting school was available.

Discussion.

The findings of this study indicate that the integration/ inclusion of all students with disabilities into regular classrooms is not supported by all New Zealand parents of students with disabilities , indeed, many parents are strongly opposed to the policy. Their opposition is not grounded in ideology but rather, in either their past experience of inclusion or their assessment of the likely outcomes for their child of attending a regular school.

This is not a reflection on New Zealand schools which are highly developed, well resourced and which have included significant numbers of students with disabilities. A reading of New Zealand policy documents would suggest that New Zealand educational authorities are most supportive of inclusion initiatives, indeed, the fact that this evaluative study was undertaken in New Zealand is some measure of the nation's commitment to providing the best available service to students with disability.

The findings do not contribute greatly to the overall efficacy debate as to inclusive or segregated settings are a better option for students with disability. The results simply indicate that a significant number of parents of students attending special schools wish to have their children continue to do so. Policies such as full inclusion, which endavour to remove the option of placement in a special school setting by closing these facilities, are, on the basis of these results, operating in contravention of the wishes of some parents.

The responses of these parents remind academics, administrators and activists that policies which emanate from philosophical and ideological positions, if enacted, will have real consequences for the persons they seek to assist. This being the case, it is our responsibility to ensure that the possible consequences of these policies are explored in advance of implementation in order to ensure that the persons we seek to help are not harmed.

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